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ABSTRACT

Business and industry are faced with enormous transition, and workforce development has become critical to competitiveness. Jobs requiring technical skills are expected to grow to 65 percent of the market, while unskilled, low-end wage jobs should shrink to just 15 percent. Estimates indicate that up to 75 percent of the existing workforce will require significant job retraining over the next five years. Community colleges are emerging as potential, major providers of this training, able to offer one-stop operations, targeted job training, on-the-job training, industry-specific customized training, services for special populations, historically collaborative ventures, integrated methodologies, articulated learning experiences, and accountability for results. Currently, there are approximately 1,300 community colleges located within 25 miles of major population bases and businesses that are the backbone of the U.S. economy. Many of these community colleges are involved in providing training to local industries. Businesses, in turn, contract with community colleges for training because of cost-effectiveness, quality of instruction, the ability to customize training design, and location of classes. To remain viable and grow, community colleges must continue to join with regional businesses to strengthen economic competitiveness and provide the critical link between training services and jobs. (EMH)

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American Association of Community Colleges

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Responding to the Challenges of Workforce and Economic Development

The Role of America's Community Colleges

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American Association of Community Colleges
Work Group I

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Introduction

Government leaders at the state and national levels have devoted time and energy throughout the past several years to evaluating the effectiveness of the American workforce's ability to deal with challenges of emerging technologies, a redefined workplace, and international competition. At the same time, the process of "reinventing government" has been unfolding within the context of reducing government spending, eliminating duplicate and overlapping services, and redistributing both power and money to the states and communities.

Responding to the national debate regarding workforce training and the role of government and the private sector, the American Association of Community Colleges has appointed a Commission on Workforce and Community Development to review and assess the current capacities of the community colleges to be considered as a major player in new workforce initiatives and to advise the AACC Board on broad-based issues related to this area. Recently, the association asked that the commission develop a statement reflecting the current and future role of community colleges in responding to the challenges associated with the nation's workforce development agenda. Responding to the challenges of workforce and economic development is the initial position paper of the AACC commission that spells out the context and rationale for greater national involvement of community colleges as primary providers of lifelong workforce training. Given the likelihood of vigorous discussion and debate on these issues during the upcoming presidential and congressional election campaigns, this paper documents the role that

community colleges can play in the enhancement of the American economy and the work life of its citizens.

The Changing Context

New federal welfare, health care, and workforce development reform legislation is likely to consolidate myriad programs into a number of block grants, substantially reduce federal financial support, and shift primary authority for the design and delivery of support programs and services to states and communities. The workforce development/job consolidation will collapse over 129 different training and education programs that are currently housed in three major departments (labor, education, and housing and urban development). Programs such as Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology, School-to-Work, Tech Prep, Adult Education/Adult Literacy, and Vocational Rehabilitation are all being targeted for elimination and/or significant directional change.

In its place, Congress, through the Workforce Development/Careers Act and other proposed legislation, is in the process of developing plans to establish a single, unified system of job training and training-related activities. The expected outcomes of the legislation will be:

- to reduce duplication of expenditures to operate programs and services;
- to strengthen local economic development initiatives;
- to encourage business/industry and education to jointly improve workforce development programs for youth and adults;
- to effectively utilize the new workforce development initiative to transfer welfare recipients to gainful employment;
- to provide for more accessible information about job preparation and training through one-stop centers;
- to provide for a greater degree of accountability and performance-based assessment;
- to provide fiscal incentives to increase the academic and vocational skill levels of current and future employees; and most importantly,
- to provide for a highly skilled workforce to support the country's economic development initiatives.

Business and industry are faced with enormous challenges and workforce development is critical to their future competitiveness. The workplace is undergoing tremendous transition. In 1950, 60 percent of all jobs were unskilled and required little, if any, postsecondary experience. By 1991 only 35 percent of all jobs were "unskilled." Interestingly, the percentage of professional jobs requiring a four-year degree or more remained unchanged at 20 percent. However, the percentage of skilled jobs, requiring formal postsecondary education and training, grew to become the largest proportion of the workforce sector. That trend is expected

to continue through the year 2000. Jobs requiring technical skills are expected to grow to 65 percent of the market while unskilled, low-end wage jobs are expected to shrink to just 15 percent of the market. The professional job market is expected to remain at about the 20 percent level, as it was in 1950.

Four-year colleges and universities (with help from community college transfer programs and students) have done an effective job of preparing the top 20 percent of the population for productive work and satisfying lives. However, economists and labor analysts generally agree that the preparation of the remaining 80 percent of the population with basic reading, writing, computational, information processing, business, technical, and learning skills, remains the critical training objective. Some estimates indicate that up to 75 percent of the existing workforce will require significant job retraining over the next five years, due to changes in the workforce (e.g., the impact of technology) and the retirement of large numbers of older workers. Add the challenges posed by welfare reform whereby welfare-to-work expectations reflect a need for people to obtain and keep jobs that pay enough for them to support their families and maintain financial stability and independence. One concludes that the stakes are high on almost every level-economically, socially, and politically. Therefore, the times are particularly opportune for looking at new models to train a world-class workforce.

Responding to the Challenge: America's Community College

Community colleges are emerging as perhaps the major, potential providers of workforce training required to revitalize and maintain the competitiveness of the nation's businesses and industries. Currently, there are approximately 1,300 community colleges strategically located within 25 miles of 95 percent of the nation's population base and core businesses that are the backbone of the United States' economy. Today, the majority of the nation's first-time in-college freshmen, minority students, and women are enrolled in America's Peoples' College.

Recent studies completed by the League for Innovation in the Community College and jointly by the National Council on Community Services and Continuing Education and The Cooperative for the Advancement of Community-Based Post-Secondary Education (COMBASE) have underscored the important and rapidly expanding role of the community colleges in this arena. Specifically:

- 96 percent of the community colleges involved with both studies indicated that they were very directly involved in providing training and education services to business and industry;
- 8 out of 10 area businesses/industries/manufacturing centers were familiar with and/or are using the training services of their local community college.
- Principal reasons cited by business and industry contributing to their decision to contract with community colleges for training services are:
    - cost-effectiveness of money invested;
    - quality of instruction;
    - customized training design; and

- location, either on-site or at local college.

- Types of training provided by community college have or has included:

  - workplace literacy;
  - supervision/management skills;
  - computer-related technology training (computer-integrated manufacturing, statistical process control, etc.)
  - communication skills, interpersonal relations; and
  - technical training skill courses.

Other states (Iowa, Michigan, Illinois, Florida, Mississippi, Maryland, and Texas) have conducted similar studies but have focused on their own delivery systems and have obtained similar results. Clearly community colleges are playing a key role in the training of America's workforce for a number of reasons.

1. The mission and practices of community colleges have clearly "staked out" this area (workforce, business/industry training, and economic development) as a priority for institutional development and emphasis.

2. Community colleges perceive their role as a partner with business and industry rather than just as a training provider. They make a concerted effort to engage business and industry in all aspects of their planning (i.e., institutional, program, and advisory boards). Correspondingly, businesses and industries look at their local community college as the logical first choice for training services.

3. Community colleges have a significant track record of success and customer satisfaction. Their experience in providing programs and services for adult students, who make up the bulk of the existing workforce, is clearly to their advantage.

4. Community colleges know how to customize their programs for targeted businesses and industries and have invested in advanced instructional technology and laboratories (often with industry-donated equipment) that are a "mirror-image" of the worksite conditions.

5. Community colleges have invested heavily in establishing support services for students, especially in basic skills and student assessment, as well as counseling, advising, remediation, childcare, career development, and job placement services that are critically important for both students and employees.

A Vision for the Future

As leaders at both the national and state levels struggle to design and put in place a consolidated system of job training services, community colleges must not be overlooked. Community colleges are committed to supporting economic growth and job development at

the local, state, and national levels. The nation's community colleges have been quick to respond to the country's changing human resource requirements and economic needs, and they have demonstrated exceptional fiscal and program performance outcomes. America's vast network of 1,300 community colleges should be viewed as a "primary player" in the upcoming, comprehensive workforce development system.

The vision for community colleges is that each will function as one of the nation's front-line workforce development education and training centers. Each college can serve as the leading provider of workforce education and training, and continue to join with regional/state/local businesses to strengthen the economic competitiveness and provide the critical link between training services and jobs.

Because of the emphasis each community college places on collaboration and partnership, the system can eliminate the unwarranted duplication of education, training, and employment activities and establish a solid cooperative foundation. Most community college districts have demonstrated their commitment to collaborative efforts by becoming "partners" with other providers of training and employment-related services (jobs and benefits/labor, health and human services, etc.) Many colleges share resources and facilities with these organizations in an attempt to better focus on the needs of the clients to be served. K-12/community college partnerships through Tech-Prep and School-to-Work programs also enhance their training potential and opportunities.

Community colleges currently offer a seamless educational experience from adult basic skills in the college/vocational preparatory programs to points of entry into the nation's workforce or ultimately to transition to future career training opportunities at a four-year college or university. It is common for community colleges to offer literacy education, English as a second language, and foreign language skills training to the growing number of citizens who wish to enter education and training programs designed to prepare them for the high-wage, high-skilled jobs of the future.

The nation's community colleges are positioned to take a leadership role in workforce development activities. All colleges can provide:

ONE-STOP OPERATIONS that cooperate and collaborate to provide outreach, intake, assessment, career counseling, education and training referral, financial assistance, job placement, and other transition-to-work referral assistance and maximize the use of advanced technology to deliver cost-effective services. The new opportunity for community colleges to be "linked-up" to the National Department of Labor "Internet Access Zone" enhances the capacity of the local community colleges to be a partner in providing critical employment and training information to clients in need. It is expected that a significant majority of community colleges will join this effort.

TARGETED JOB TRAINING for students seeking high-wage employment and employers seeking high-skilled employees.

ON-THE-JOB-TRAINING including apprenticeships, internships, cooperative education, and work-based paid learning experiences.

INDUSTRY-SPECIFIC CUSTOMIZED TRAINING, including "just in time"

training, as needed, for current and future employees.

SERVICES FOR SPECIAL POPULATIONS including educationally and economically disadvantaged youth and adults, veterans, Native Americans, migrant and seasonal farmworkers, welfare-to-work transition clients, individuals with disabilities, dislocated workers, underemployed workers, women and minorities, single parents, single pregnant women, non-English speaking persons, illiterate persons, the homeless, and criminal offenders.

HISTORICALLY COLLABORATIVE VENTURES designed to foster economic and human resource development including: K-12 systems, labor and employment services, health, human and rehabilitative services, county/city commissions, chambers of commerce, economic development agencies, private industry councils, and business/industry.

INTEGRATED METHODOLOGIES including advanced computerized learning systems and distance learning technical applications in academic and technical education programs, producing high-skilled graduates.

ARTICULATED LEARNING EXPERIENCES among high schools and other colleges and universities, including Tech Prep and School-to-Work Programs.

ACCOUNTABILITY FOR RESULTS, as demonstrated by competency skill standards, licensure, successful job placement, and other performance indicators.

Conclusion

America's community colleges are ready and willing to play a leadership role in the nation's workforce development future. This has been the historic and traditional (although often unnoticed) role of community colleges. This market-driven, placement-based, community-managed, customer-focused, outcome-accountable model will contribute to more cost-effective use of federal, state, and local taxpayer dollars at a time when available resources to improve the competitive skill levels of America's workforce are declining. It is our belief that we are poised to help this country move into the 21st century with a qualified, well-trained workforce, and we will all benefit from a better future. From a national policy standpoint, it is our contention that if the vast potential of the network of community colleges is not recognized and used effectively in the workforce development strategies adopted by this country, the new initiatives are in danger again of failing, and status quo will be maintained. It is our hope that this message will emerge during the upcoming presidential and congressional campaigns when the formulations and deliberations of positions on key issues contribute significantly to the shaping of public opinion and commitment.